

This Ain't Your Daddy's Shop Class

"The great difficulty in education is to get experience out of ideas."

—George Santayana, Spanish philosopher and writer

In an effort to wed experience with ideas so students will be equipped for tomorrow's workplace, the content of career and technical education courses has expanded, as John Davidson, deputy director for CTE, puts it, "well beyond plows, cows, and chickens." The result is that CTE has come a long way from the vo-tech courses of old that were reserved for problem kids, the academically challenged, or those who had no thought of going to college.

Today's CTE courses prepare Arkansas students for jobs and further education in such fields as architecture, business, computers, engineering, health sciences, information technology, journalism, and marketing as well as agriculture, automotive technology, cabinet making, family and consumer sciences, and welding.

Who takes CTE courses these days? Just about everyone. For the 2004/05 school year, 75 percent (156,226) of Arkansas students in grades 7-12 enrolled in at least one CTE course – up from 69 percent in 2002/03.

Unlike the traditional vocational programs, today's courses reach across the board to honors students as well as special needs students. And the ethnic diversity of CTE students pretty much reflects the diversity of the state. In the 2004/05 school year, 71 percent of Arkansas students taking at least one CTE course were white, 22 percent were black, 4.8 percent Hispanic, 1.4 percent Asian, and 0.5 percent American Indian. (U.S. Census figures for 2004 show 77 percent of Arkansans were white, 15.8 percent black, 4.4 percent Hispanic, 0.9 percent Asian, and 0.7 percent American Indian.)

Because CTE points students toward real-world careers that demand a high level of thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills, the students also are encouraged to take the Smart Core academic courses and

prepare for postsecondary education – be it a technical institute, two-year school, or a four-year university.

As a result, CTE students have a higher graduation rate than that of the general high school population. The 2004/05 graduation rate for CTE concentrators – high school students who took two units in an occupational area – was 90.1 percent. But the graduation rate for the state as a whole that year was 81.3 percent, according to Arkansas Department of Education figures.

Another impressive statistic is the number of college credits CTE students are earning while in high school. In the 2004/05 school year, 2,038 Arkansas high school students earned 14,561 concurrent college credit hours by taking CTE courses at secondary area technical centers. Through the Tech Prep program, another 24,073 CTE students earned 54,378 college credit hours – 36,324 through articulation and 18,054 through concurrent enrollment.

This college credit is even more significant when compared with Advanced Placement academic courses, which offer college credit to high school students who take the course and then score high enough on the AP test. According to the 2004/05 ADE state report card, 24,327 Arkansas students enrolled in an AP course. Of the 21,892 students taking the exams, about 27 percent scored high enough to earn college credit. Thus, 5,881 students earned a total of about 17,600 college credit hours through the AP program.

CTE has definitely evolved from the shop classes of yore, but it has yet to break through the old stereotypes. The challenge ahead is to tell its story and show how CTE is an investment in Arkansas and key to education reform. That's a success story waiting to happen.